Interview: Michael Stampfer – Managing Director, Vienna Science and Technology Fund (WWTF), Austria



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09.10.2017

Tags: Austria, WWTF, R&D, Research, Funding,

Michael Stampfer, managing director of the Vienna Science and Technology Fund (WWTF), the only private, non-profit organization in Vienna dedicated to funding scientific research, discusses the challenges scientific research faces in Austria and how the organization helps bridge the gap between academia and industry. Furthermore, he illustrates the steps taken to choose which specific scientific field obtains funding and what Austria must do to be considered a regional R&D hub.

As the managing director, could you please introduce to our international readers the Vienna Science and Technology Fund (WWTF)?

We are the only private, non-profit organization located in Vienna that is designed to fund scientific research. Currently, we have an annual budget of close to 13 million EUR (15.5 million USD) that is distributed between our various activities, with the larger share of these funds coming from the foundation and a smaller share from the City of Vienna. The majority of the funding being private gives us greater flexibility in our operations.

I have been here since 2002, being the only managing director in the organization's history; therefore, I have had the opportunity to witness the body's evolution over the years. The vision has always been to develop Vienna as a research stronghold, not just within Austria, but across the entire central European region. This was due to the fact for decades Austria had research quality

concerns, contrary to many other developed markets such as Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland and Netherlands. Only in the 1980’s did we move to improve this quality; therefore, we still lag behind in research funding and the system overall is still in the developmental stage.

What are the main challenges that scientific research is facing within the Austrian market?

First and foremost, our university system is not as refined as other developed nations. Many young scientists are coming to Austria, and more specifically Vienna, though we face huge difficulties in retaining them after they have graduated due to neighbouring countries, such as Switzerland and Germany, offering greater incentives. This is mainly due to Austria not having a plan to how to really offer career options to the top five to ten percent of students; there is a void, and these are the areas that WWTF is helping to fund.

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Overall Austria is completely underfunded in the public sector in translational and clinical research, and the Ministries of Health and Science have not contributed heavily. Stronghold disciplinary areas such as oncology, physics and biology have built their own scientific communities, though there are no holistic approaches that are devoted to interdisciplinary research between the sectors.

Our role is to fund scientific research, rather than applied research, as already generous tax incentives and funding opportunities exist for companies. Furthermore, we devote funds to fields that are strong in Vienna and there exists larger competition for our grants; therefore, life science has always been one of the areas we focus most heavily on. Our strategy is to invest in grants of larger amounts, up to 1 million EUR (1.2 million USD), rather than a large quantity with lesser amounts.

What do you see as the advantages of conducting healthcare research in Austria?

Health is an extremely important topic in Austria, and the Austrian population expects always to receive world-class medical care. The Austrian healthcare system is based around strong pillars of good hospitals, well informed patients and an educated and diligent workforce. This allows many opportunities to arise, and Austria consists of world-class research in certain therapeutic fields, such as oncology.

On the other hand, Austria does not contain many multinational companies R&D branches. The companies that have over the years had large operations here in production and R&D, such as Boehringer Ingelheim, Novartis and Shire, positioned themselves in Austria after headquarters had

acquired a smaller domestic player.

This typical pattern could be altered with more incentives as we are seen by many as a second-tier nation, compared to say Switzerland and Germany. When we go to these nations we are always taking advice to bring back to Austria; therefore, we are looking to possibly replicate their R&D models to make Austria more attractive in the future.

WWTF has a budget that hovers around 13 million EUR (15.5 million USD) annually. How do you arrive at the decision of where to allocate the funds?

The local advisory board, that consists of many university members and experts, collaborate together to understand the specific fields to focus on. For example, recently there was a lot of evidence to diversify into information and communication technology (ICT) research, especially considering this sector is heavily underfunded in Vienna. Life sciences is by far our largest sector: therefore, we fund specific areas, such as regenerative medicine, bioengineering and personalized medicine. The aim is to link sub-fields and create an ecosystem of translational research.

Furthermore, the local advisory board helps us in constructing an international funding jury to select peers from abroad. For each project, we have around ten international jury members working for us from start to finish, giving us different angles in selecting the most exciting projects. This is the big advantage when funding interdisciplinary research as we can properly evaluate world-wide trends. Also, one-third of our staff works on analysing and evaluating our strategies, while in the meantime we obtain quantitative data for universities. This all helps us to constantly develop our organization’s operations.

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R&D costs globally are rising very sharply, and companies are finding it year on year harder to keep up. How is WWTF able to gain secondary funding to help maintain your impact?

This at times can be a problem – although – each year our budget rises a certain percentage more than the previous to keep up with the rising costs of research. Moreover, the City of Vienna invests around three to four million EUR (3.5 to 3.7 million USD) to an individual program.

We also have a matching funds incentive in place; this means for every amount donated externally by a private donor, the city of Vienna will match this dollar for dollar. Since starting this program 18 months ago, we have already attracted two donors. Nevertheless, this is only a part of the answer, and we are concerned about our restricted budget, so hopefully we can change this in the future.

The Austrian healthcare ecosystem is very committed to promoting Austrian R&D. What more can be done to establish the country as a regional hub for research operations?

Our Vienna Research Group program aims to bring around three top young experts to Vienna to help construct a strong research ecosystem. These individuals compete for the funds, and must be nominated hand-in-hand with a domestic university. This offers the chosen candidates the opportunity of long-term career perspectives, and demonstrates to the universities a model to develop students from academia to industry. Furthermore, we promote research done in Vienna by being part of international conferences and workshops, in locations such as New York and Singapore.

At WWTF we must continue to promote the abundance of opportunities in Vienna to ensure a sustainable long-term future of local R&D and attract the best young, ambitious experts from all corners of the globe to come here and conduct their work.

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